

1/ *Enola Holmes* and the mystery of the missing mother

2/ Millie Bobby Brown, the young star and (impressively) producer of *Enola Homes* is keen to emphasise in every interview she does the feminist message of the film – what exactly that message is less clear but its young star believes that the film ‘empowers young women to speak up for what they believe in.’

3/ The woke generation - The fourth wave feminists with whom I think both Millie Bobby Brown and her fan-base would align themselves, have a very specific ideological paradox to solve. On the one hand they represent the ideal neoliberal subject; on the other they have noticed that something is not right and that something needs to be done. Anything other than an individual striving for identity, voice and agency, however, may be difficult to envisage, much less embrace. The feminisms of the past do not sit well with the sensibilities of these young women. The film (on one level at least) represents an attempt to make sense of some of these contradictions through what Mark Lewellyn’ has called a ‘creative dialogue with the past’ ; in common with many NeoVictorian texts it proves a productive platform on which to engage with some of the unresolved issues of postfeminism (however that might be defined)

4/ Particular elements that I find interesting in this film are **nostalgia** (in both its reflexive and its restorative manifestations, to use Svetlana Boym's distinction), the **investigative trope** – a common feature of many such texts, as Imelda Whelehan has remarked, and the metaphor of the mother or more particularly the **mother-daughter** relationship and its impact on identity – which Nadine Muller has found to be another key neo-Victorian theme as well as being utilised by Astrid Henry among others to understand the post-ing of feminism.

5/ *Enola Holmes* is a teen action film transplanted to a late Victorian setting. The film is adapted from the first in Nancy Springer’s series of Enola Holmes mysteries, and introduces us to the much younger sister of Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes who has up to this point been living in a seclude rural manor house with her widowed mother, and has had no contact at all with her famous brothers since she was a baby. An unconventional up-bringing has prepared her for independence – and when her mother Eudoria mysteriously disappears Enola (whose name, we are told, is an anagram for alone) Enola is called upon to prove her mettle against a range of opponents.

6/ A secondary plot involves another disappearance – that of the young Marquess of Tewksbury - and indeed the book is entitled: “The Case of the Missing Marquess”. Enolas relationship with the Marquis provides romantic interest; and by uncovering a plot to kill him, and protecting him from the plotters, she establishes herself as a detective hero. However he is never really ‘missing’ as far as Enola is concerned. In fact it is all she can do not to fall over him every time she turns around. She is able to find *him* in the middle of London with no trouble at all.

7/The structuring absence at the centre of the film, then, is that of Enola’s mother. And it is her quest to find her mother - both in terms of tracking down her literal whereabouts and in terms of understanding her motivations; that principally informs the process of self-discovery central to a coming of age movie. Enola’s relationship with her absent mother – the extent to which she follows or rejects the guidance of her mother-as–embodied-super-ego –is critical to the development of her adult identity.

8/ This maternal absence, for Enola, is profound. Her mother has been her protector, her mentor and her best friend. Life with her mother –tennis, fencing, archery, hand-to-hand combat - is shown as a blend of childhood utopia and ‘wax-on, wax-off’ training camp. Whereas in the book Enola’s mother is a distant figure, preparing her daughter for independence by leaving her very much to her own devices, and Enola develops her physical prowess as the natural result of being left alone, in the film her mother is a very visible, emphatically liberating influence – and not only because she is played by the inimitable Helena Bonham Carter. Flashbacks to their former life together, and to her mother’s teaching and philosophy, provide an ongoing commentary on Enola’s adventures.

9/ The book and the film also diverge on the reasons for the mother’s disappearance. It turns out that the already distant mother of the book has literally run off with gypsies so that she can end her days freed of the corsets and stays - both literal and figurative - that signify the era. The mother of the film, given her close relationship with her daughter, could not possibly leave for anything but a higher cause – and to forward the condition of women in general – her daughter included. She, it transpires, is involved in a form of radical feminist politics that, with its organised direct action, consciousness raising and somewhat anachronistic self-defence classes above the tea shop, offers a distinct pre-echo of the second wave.

10/ The two plots converge around the 1884 Reform Bill which is about to go before parliament [this was a bill which historically extended the suffrage to a higher proportion of men – ultimately paving the way for universal suffrage]. This political element does not feature in the book but is unique to the film adaptation, directed by History Graduate Harry Bradbeer. The Marquess’ will be the deciding vote in favour of reform so that his assassination is the only way to stop the bill; meanwhile it transpires that Enola’s mother is leading a plot to blow something up –possibly in protest at the absence of women’s suffrage from the bill [the film is unclear on details – only that there is a jeopardous juxtaposition of women and explosives involved]

11/ Enolas brothers, summoned from London to deal with the dual problems of the missing mother and Enola’s future, take a decidedly patriarchal view – although Sherlock’s stance is somewhat softened by Enola’s obvious abilities. Having established that their mother has left of her own free will to engage in political activism, Mycroft announces that she is announces that she is mad and dangerous [evoking the ‘madwoman’ trope that was so popular with Victorian writers and reworked in neo-Victorian literature form *Wide Sagasso Sea* to the *Fingersmith*]. Enola loyally defends her mother but when, in the course of her investigations, she comes upon the warehouse where the suffragettes have laid up stores of dynamite, and assorted munitions alongside ‘votes for women’ leaflets, murmurs in agreement ‘Mycroft was right – you *are* dangerous’. The discovery momentarily shakes Enola’s faith in her mother - causing her to wonder momentarily whether she really wants to find her after all.

12/ Her search for her mother, then, is propelled by three separate yet entangled motivations Firstly there is Enola’s nostalgia for an idyllic childhood, particularly acute as she is thrust into a perilous adult world, Successive flashbacks are suffused with a romantic lighting and soft focus glimpses of the elusive Eudoria. Fundamentally the girl misses her mum. Secondly

there is Enola's need to understand her mother's motivations and those private parts of her life from which her daughter has been excluded – making sense of her mother is a key factor in making sense of herself and her own place in the world. Thirdly there is the investigation for its own sake – the joy of the chase so to speak – signified by Enola's use of and search for cyphers. Eudoria is a puzzle and Enola must solve the puzzle and track her down to win her 'detectives' spurs.

13/ These motivations seem to speak directly to the nuanced, contradictory 'matrophor' (a term attributed to Rebecca Quinn) that characterises the relationship between the woman's movement and successive post feminisms, which cannot help but define themselves in terms of rejection of, comparison with, development from or nostalgia for that legacy.

14/ Interestingly, the Marquis plot hinges on a text-book case of restorative nostalgia on the part of his grandmother who is so desperate to maintain the status quo of the England of her ultra-conservative fantasy that she will have her own grandson killed rather than countenance a reform that will upset what she believes to be the rightful order of things. A salutary lesson, it seems in the dangers of becoming stuck in the past.

15/ Our heroine, by contrast, must break free from the spell of nostalgia in order to achieve her independence, taking time out from her search for Eudoria to rescue the Marquis. In doing so she rejects two of her mother's lessons – one about not risking her own life to rescue lost sheep (literal or metaphorical); the other about not allowing herself to be distracted by men. Her decision is the right one, however, and does fulfil her mother's most important behest – that she must find her own path. It is only after she has done so that Eudoria finally reappears –to congratulate her daughter on the woman she has become

16/ The film itself is suffused with a reflexive nostalgia that has a strong grasp on the ironic element stressed by Boym. On the one hand the neo-Victorian setting takes us back to an (imagined) simpler time when we knew where we stood and just putting on a pair of pants and riding a bike was a notable form of resistance. In sharp contrast with the modern world in which the mechanics of oppression can be difficult to identify and the battle-lines are often ill-defined. On the other hand, a playful variation on the double consciousness that characterises the neo-Victorian genre is provided by Enola's direct address to camera - which highlights the modern heroine beneath the late Victorian costume.

17/ While the film's particular blend of sophistication and naiveté reflects its young target audience, I would argue that the intertwining of the investigative trope with a sense of feminist nostalgia and a focus on the mother-daughter relationship – closely associated with issues of identity - speak to some underlying concerns of contemporary feminisms which the neo-Victorian genre seems uniquely qualified to explore.